Developing Business Management Students' Persuasive Writing Through Blog-based Peer-Feedback

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Abstract

The present study attempted to investigate the effect of using blog-based peer feedback on the persuasive writing of EFL business management students at the community college in Bisha, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. The study used a pre-test/post-test experimental and control group design. An experimental group and a control group were exposed to pre-post means of getting data (a pre-post test of persuasive writing). Results of the analysis of the differences between means of scores of the study subjects in the pre-post-measurements revealed a significant improvement in the experimental group students' persuasive writing.

Keywords: Persuasive Writing, Weblog, Peer feedback

1. Introduction and background

With the astonishing advances in communications, brought about mainly by computer and internet, good writing skills have become more and more, essential for communication in both academic and real life. According to Olshtain (2001, p. 206), "the skill of writing enjoys special status-it is via writing that a person can communicate a variety of messages to a close or distant, known or unknown reader or readers. Such communication is extremely important in the modern world, whether the interaction takes the form of traditional paper-and-pencil writing or the most technologically advanced electronic mail". For Graham & Perin (2007, p. 3), "writing well is not just an option for young people—it is a necessity. Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy". Lin & Chien (2009, p. 79) put it clearly that "free writing, at the beginning of our second millennium, is one of the primary methods that human beings use to convey their thoughts and communicate with each other".

However, writing is not a simple process, even in the mother language, and it is very challenging for almost all students. According to Celce-Murcia & Olshtain (2000, p. 141), even "a skilled writer, who writes often and for a variety of purposes, does not necessarily find the writing process easy. Many such writers report on the difficulties they encounter in sitting down to initiate a writing task or to carry out the final reformation of something that has already been written in draft form". For Miranda (2003, p. 3) "writing is not easy to acquire. People write less than they speak, even in their first language, which in turn leads to fewer opportunities to practice". Justifying the same difficulty, Brickman (1992, pp. 5-6), claims that "the preoccupation of ESL writers with writing error-free papers either paralyzes them or causes them sacrifice valuable ideas because they are afraid to write". According to the American alliance for excellent education (AFEE) report, the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in writing shows that very large numbers of adolescents need interventions to help them become better writers (AFEE, 2006, p. 2).

For business professionals, the need to write clearly, quickly and convincingly has never been more essential than in today's exceedingly competitive, technology-driven global economy. They are most likely to write in the genre of persuasive writing. They need to write business proposals, reports, letters, e-mails and briefings that persuade both individuals and groups of readers. n a recent survey of accounting professionals, a national sample of certified public accountant (CPA) firms was asked to rate nineteen professional skills on their importance and the perceived effectiveness of business curricula in developing these skills, writing skills ranked third in importance, out of nineteen (Ulrich et al., 2003). In another national survey of accounting professionals to determine the relative importance of 32 business communication skills needed by newly hired accounting graduates, seven of the top-ten skills were related to writing (Christensen et al., 2004).

Unfortunately, writing, as Jack (2009) states, has been seen as a soft skill that would be nice to improve, not worth the time or money to invest in training. Most companies tend to invest in training for sales, project management, budgeting, or other skills that are easier to link to the bottom line, neglecting the reality that poor writing equals low productivity. Actually, poorly written and unconvincing documents can cause employees to reread instructions, perform tasks incorrectly, and miscommunicate with their customers. On the other hand, employees who possess superior writing skills help their organizations achieve their goals, create high customer satisfaction levels, and lower the business communication-related costs.

Reviewing features of the Web 2.0 era, it is found that blogging is the best-received feature. Blogs or weblogs have many advantages for all users over other internet tools. They are easy and quick to create; readers can often respond through a "comments" feature, no knowledge of HTML is needed, easily linked and crosslinked to other websites to create larger on-line communities and above all, they can be free or very low-cost to create.

In the educational setting in general, and in language teaching and learning in particular, blogs have become extremely popular owing to their multi merits. According to Fellner & Apple (2006), using Blogs in EFL/ESL teaching and learning meets seven criteria of task appropriateness; blogs provide students with real *learning* opportunities and they *fit* with students' interests and varying English levels. Blogs also meet a third criterion, *meaning*, as the students are responsible for making sure to write their blog entries clearly enough for their classmates to understand. In addition, blogs provide both students and teachers with *authentic* tasks. The fifth criterion, which is *impact*, is also met, as the blogs provide students not only with opportunities to acquire and use new vocabulary but also with new and useful computer skills. Blogging meets the criterion of *practicality* in that it imposes no extra financial burden on either the university or the students. Finally, blogs met the criterion of *enhancement* in that they are much more practical to use than paper-based diaries. For Wu (2006), using blogs in TEFL has tremendous advantages to both EFL teachers and students; they have the potential to be a truly transformational technology in that they provide a teaching and learning stage where students enjoy a high level of independence and good opportunities for greater interaction with peers and the teacher conducts his teaching with high efficiency.

In contrast to traditional classroom settings, blogs can be very effective in many ways. First, helping students to communicate and collaborate with each other in the target language outside the confines of the classroom. Second, having the freedom to choose where and when they want to work. Third, expressing their thoughts at their own pace and in their own space. Fourth, supporting cooperative and autonomous learning. Fifth, encouraging ownership and responsibility on the part of students through self-publishing (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Edwards & Mehring, 2005; Anderson, 2006; Jones, 2006; Mynard, 2007; Sun, 2009).

The adoption of competency-based learning and engaging students in active learning by completing authentic assignments resulted in an exponential increase in teachers' workloads. At the same time, it is commonly agreed upon that, providing students with frequent and detailed feedback on their work is something essential for the process of learning. Unfortunately, the increase in teachers' workloads together with the large numbers of students imposed additional, and sometimes unmanageable, administrative burden on the teachers (Mulder & Pearce, 2007). This, in turn, has led to a situation where students simply do not get feedback on many or even most of their assignments and if there is any, it is often scanty and arrives too late for the students to revise the assignments before turning them in.

In this respect, many researchers stress the potential benefits of using peer feedback for EFL/ESL writers, as well as, writing teachers. According to Lundstrom (2006), peer feedback for second language learners provides students with the opportunity to use language in a meaningful way. For Lin & Chien (2009, p. 79), "when students are authorized to take on the role of the editor for their peer's papers to carry out the correction process, they seem to be more confident and motivation-stimulated in their writing courses". While feedback from other students may not be as authoritative as from an expert teacher, it is available in greater volume and with greater immediacy (De Volder et al., 2007).

However, class time is always limited for giving and taking feedback among students and some students, especially the shy or the less confident ones, avoid giving critical feedback before their colleagues inside the classroom. To overcome these problems, Hall (2006) claims that weblogs are the primary vehicle for students to reflect and give each other feedback on what was presented in class. Supporting this claim, Doris (2009) declares that weblogs are potentially valuable tools for peer-feedback. Ertmer et al. (2007), state that despite students' preferences for instructor feedback, online peer feedback is very valuable and, more importantly, online peer feedback not only reinforces students' learning but enables them to achieve higher understanding. Ernst (2005) puts it clearly that being engaged in a non-threatening environment in weblogs, EFL/ESL students have the opportunity to explore many challenging topics. They also are encouraged to take risks without primarily focusing on grammatical form. According to Sun (2009), by reducing social-context clues such as gender, race, and status, and nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and body language, computer-mediated communication (CMC) provides a safer and a more relaxed environment for language learners.

2. Context of the problem

As can be understood, blogs have become very popular in the past few years. They have been supported more and more as a medium of teaching and learning, not only for native speakers, but for EFL/ESL learners as well. At the same time, the researcher, as an EFL instructor, noticed that business management students at the

community college in Bisha, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia, where he works, suffer from poor writing skills. When they are asked to write a letter or a business proposal for example, during the writing class, their writing is often poor and unconvincing and lacks the needed persuasive techniques. In an attempt to solve this problem, the present study tries to investigate the effect of using blog-based peer feedback on students' persuasive writing.

3. Statement of the problem

Business management students at the community college in Bisha, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia, suffer from poor persuasive writing skills. Hence, the present study is an attempt to investigate the effect of using blog-based peer feedback on their persuasive writing. More specifically, the study attempts to answer the following question:

3.1 What is the effect of using blog-based peer feedback on the persuasive writing of EFL business management students at the community college in Bisha, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia?

4. Hypotheses of the study

The researcher hypothesizes the following:

4.1 There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores obtained by students of the experimental group and those of the control group in the pre-test of persuasive writing.

4.2 There is a statistically significant difference favoring the experimental group between the mean scores obtained by students of the experimental group and those of the control group in the post-test of persuasive writing.

5. Literature review

In this review of literature, a discussion of the available previous research related to three main topics is presented; face-to-face peer feedback in language teaching and learning, online peer feedback in language teaching and learning, and using weblogs in language teaching and learning.

5.1 Face-to-face peer-feedback in language learning

In language teaching, in general, and in the teaching of writing in particular, face-to-face peer-feedback, in which students exchange their work and comment on each other has been shown to be valuable. Peer review is not a new educational practice. The most important of the merits of peer learning is that it offers the opportunity for students to learn from each other and it provides a learning experience that is qualitatively different from the usual teacher-student interactions (Saunders, 2005). It also plays an important role in motivating students as it informs them about the degree of their learning and it enables them to distinguish between accepted and unaccepted forms of communication in the target language (Alavi & Kaivanpanah, 2007).

The potential role of face-to-face peer-feedback in teaching and learning in secondary, as well as, higher education has been examined and discussed extensively in literature. Gielen et al. (2010) examined whether peer feedback can be a substitute for teacher feedback and which measures can be taken to improve its effectiveness. Results revealed that there is no significant difference between peer feedback and teacher feedback; both are of the same importance for the development of students' writing skills. The study of Lin & Chien (2009) focused on investigating effectiveness of peer feedback on the writing of English majors from communal, cognitive, cooperative and pedagogical perspectives. Results indicated that most participants believed that peer feedback positively assisted their learning in English writing. Lundstrom 's (2006) study attempted to investigate the benefits of peer review to the reviewer, or the student giving the feedback, in the field of second language writing; which is more beneficial to improving student writing: receiving or giving peer feedback. Results showed that the treatment groups, which focused solely on reviewing peers' writing, made more significant gains in their writing than the control groups.

5.2 Online peer-feedback in language learning

With the growing interest in online learning in general, there is an equivalent growing interest in various forms of online assessment and feedback. Compared to face-to-face oral or written, online peer-feedback proved to have many advantages. Rourke et al. (2008) conducted two case studies, which showcase two approaches to using peer review to teach coursework masters students how to write a research paper in arts administration; the first case study used the anonymous and random online calibrated peer review (CPR) while the second used computer mediated peer review (CMPR) within the discussion forum. Results indicated that online peer review is a useful tool for assisting students towards writing a successful research paper, particularly when students are provided with specified assessment criteria, grade-ranking system and set deadlines. It helps them to take responsibility for their own learning process, to value the opinions of others, and to improve their time

management as they work collaboratively towards a common goal. Ware & O'Dowd (2008) explored the impact of online peer feedback on language development among English and Spanish learners in weekly asynchronous discussions. Pedagogical implications of this study included the need to situate peer feedback on form within current models of telecollaboration and to assist students in using feedback strategies. In an exploratory study, Ertmer et al. (2007) examined the use of an innovative instructional approach for online learning peer feedback. This study examined students' perceptions of the perceived value of giving and receiving peer feedback, specifically related to the quality of discussion postings, in an online course. Results indicated that despite students' preferences for instructor feedback, the quality of students' postings was maintained through the use of online peer feedback.

Guardado & Shi (2007) reported an exploratory study of English as a second language (ESL) students' experiences of online peer feedback. The study showed that online peer feedback, while eliminating the logistical problems of carrying papers around, retains some of the best features of traditional written feedback, including a text-only environment that pushes students to write balanced comments with an awareness of the audience's needs and with an anonymity that allows peers to make critical comments on each other's writings. An intervention of face-to-face class discussion with teacher's guidance to clarify comments in question is suggested to maximize the effect of online peer feedback. Ho & Savignon (2007) examined the use of face-to-face peer review and computer mediated peer review in an EFL academic writing context. Responses to the Likert-scale items suggested that although learners accepted both peer review modes, they had more favorable attitudes toward face-to-face peer review than computer-mediated peer review.

The purpose of Lu & Bol's (2007) experiment was to compare the effects of anonymous and identifiable electronic peer review on college student writing performance and the extent of critical peer feedback. Results showed that students participating in anonymous e-peer review performed better on the writing performance task and provided more critical feedback to their peers than did students participating in the identifiable e-peer review. Mulder & Pearce's (2007) study reported on an initial trial in which they administered peer review using PRAZE - an online system –that allows the distribution and anonymous exchange of work between students in an educational setting to be automated. Surveys indicated that the opportunity to participate and benefit from peer review was broadly appreciated by students.

Wu's (2006) study investigated EFL adult learners' reactions to peer review and teacher feedback in composition class. Both the peer review and teacher feedback were given and transmitted via the web to learners' blog. While teacher feedback appeared to lead to both positive and negative revisions, depending on learners' attitudes and English proficiency, a significant proportion of the peer review did not serve a linguistic function to give meaningful and constructive comments but serve a pragmatic function to give complimentary praise or blessings. In their experimental study, (Bauer & Figl, 2006) explored the quality and kind of feedback given in a peer-reviewing task. The study analyzed the differences between the face-to-face and the online setting. Results showed that students commented on fewer topics in the online version but described them in more detail than in the paper version. In addition, the online version was experienced as time-efficient and easy to fill out, while students found it significantly easier to express feedback in the paper version.

5.3 Using weblogs in language teaching and learning

In a very recent descriptive study, Ennis & Gambrell (2010) concluded that there is no difference in the utilization of weblog and podcast technology for school related purposes between faculty and millennial students in a selected teacher education department, and that weblogs and podcasts enhance learning experience. Sun's (2009) study aimed at verifying the argument that extensive practice on blogs can constitute an integral part of instruction, and that blogs enable students to structure their thoughts. This study used voice blogs as a platform for an extensive study of language learners' speaking skills. Results revealed that students (a) developed a series of blogging stages, including conceptualizing, brainstorming, articulation, monitoring, and evaluating, and used a wide variety of strategies to cope with blogging-related difficulties, and (b) perceived blogging as a means of learning, self-presentation, information exchange, and social networking. Findings also suggest that blogs can constitute a dynamic forum that fosters extensive practice, learning motivation, authorship, and development of learning strategies. Namvar et al.'s (2009) study aimed at studying the effect of web- based learning (weblog) by problem solving approach on English Literature student's reflective thinking. Data analysis showed that weblog based learning positively affected the development of student's reflective thinking.

Doris's (2009) study investigated the extent to which blogs can facilitate peer feedback in an advanced German language class. Results indicated that blogs are potentially valuable tools for peer feedback, but entail the need to address specific issues regarding the choice of CMC tool for feedback tasks, training in the use of interactive online tools and the roles of teachers and students.

Mynard's (2007) study draws on data collected from female college students who kept voluntary blogs in their free time throughout a semester they spent studying English in the UK. The findings suggested that blogs could be one tool for educators to use in order to encourage students to reflect on their learning. The purpose of Jones's (2006) study was to introduce blogging into a community college ESL writing class and to examine the significance of its use for the process writing approach. Results came congruent with previous research on technology and second language writing. Blogging proved to be an effective tool for the writing process approach as evidenced by the numerous benefits for its use that outweighed the drawbacks. Blogging facilitated the students' critical thinking skills; affected the quality of students' writing; provided examples of feedback and entries for the students to read, model, and from which to learn; facilitated meaningful learning for students; gave students a purpose for writing; and motivated students' writing and interaction by publishing for an authentic audience.

Fellner & Apple (2006) utilized student blogs in an integrated CALL program for low proficiency, low motivation university language learners. Learner gains in writing fluency were described by comparing the number of words and word frequency levels in student blogs at the beginning and at the end of the program. Results indicated that blog-based learning positively affected students' writing fluency.

In a phenomenological study, Xie and Sharma (2004) interviewed nine doctoral students who maintained Weblogs in a graduate course. Initial data analysis indicated that participants found Weblogs helpful for learning, reflecting, and building a sense of community. However, participants expressed concerns over the lack of structure for Weblog usage and the public nature of the reflective process.

6. Method and procedures

6.1 Participants:

Twenty-seven EFL business management students at the community college in Bisha, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia, volunteered to participate in this study. Students shared some common characteristics as they are all of average ages ranging from 18 to 20 years old, from the same Saudi culture, and with homogeneous English learning backgrounds. All students had personal computers or laptops and they had access to internet. In addition, all of them were skilled at using computer and navigating the internet. After excluding drop out the number of the students who successfully completed the experiment was 20 students. They were randomly assigned, either to experimental or to control group.

6.2 Experimental design

The study used a pre-test/post-test experimental and control group design. An experimental group and a control group were exposed to pre-post means of getting data (a pre-post test of persuasive writing). The experimental group practiced persuasive writing giving and receiving peer feedback through a class blog, while the control group practiced persuasive writing giving and receiving face-to-face peer feedback among all members of the group inside the classroom.

6.3 Tools of the study

In order to achieve the objective of the present study, the following tool was prepared by the researcher;

6.3.1 Pre-post persuasive writing test (see appendix 1)

6.3.1.1 Objective of the test

Based on the main objective of the study, the present test aimed at measuring the persuasive writing skills among EFL business management students at the community college in Bisha, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia.

6.3.1.2 Construction of the test

This test was of the essay type. The test in its final form consisted of two writing prompts; one for the pretest and the other for the posttest. For each prompt, subjects were asked to write a five-paragraph essay.

6.3.1.3 Scoring

The researcher developed a 5-point scoring rubric for scoring this test (see appendix 2). Five main areas were specified to be measured through this rubric. Each area represented a main criteria of persuasive writing; the first area was about *statement of position,* the second was about *reasons supporting the stated position*, the third was about *anticipating opposing viewpoints or reasons against that position*, the fourth was about *writing organization* and the fifth was about *writing conventions*.

6.3.1.1 Nature of the scoring system

Two raters scored each student's paper. Raters independently rated the student's writing on five criteria of persuasive writing. These criteria of persuasive writing should be present in the student's writing. They are;

statement of position, reasons supporting the stated position, anticipating opposing viewpoints or reasons against that position, writing organization, and writing conventions. Thus, a student's final score on this test was the mean score given by the two raters. The scoring system was analytic. Analytic scoring simply means that more than one area of a paper is evaluated. Each area itself was scored holistically. The score assigned expresses the test rater's overall impression of the student's command of the components of each area.

6.3.1.2 The score scale

The score scale is a five-point scale. Each one of the five specified areas of persuasive writing is evaluated separately and assigned a score of "0"(lowest), "1," "2," "3," or "4"(highest). The scale is a continuum representing a range of quality. Each score point on the continuum is defined by area-specific scoring guidelines. Thus, the test maximum score of the test was 20 marks.

6.3.1.3 Area-specific scoring guidelines

6.3.1.3.1 Area (I): statement of position;

The student takes a position or makes a claim and explains why it is debatable or argumentative. (Weight = 4)

6.3.1.3.2 Area (II): reasons supporting the stated position;

The student provides clear, accurate, strong and sufficient reasons to support his position or his claim. (Weight = 4)

6.3.1.3.3 Area (III): anticipating opposing viewpoints or reasons against that position;

The student anticipates opposing viewpoints or reasons against his claim or his position and he addresses them successfully and thoroughly. (Weight = 4)

6.3.1.3.4 Area (IV): writing organization;

The student's writing is clearly developed and well organized; it has a convincing opening, strong informative body and satisfying conclusion. Paragraph format is appropriate. (Weight = 4)

6.3.1.3.5 Area (V): writing conventions;

The student's writing exhibits no grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors. It consistently, exhibits variety in sentence structure and accuracy in word choice. (Weight = 4)

6.3.1.4 Test validity

To decide content and face validity, four persuasive writing prompts and a 5-point scoring rubric were prepared by the researcher and shown to a panel of TEFL experts. After revising the test according to the comments of the experts, the final form consisted of two writing prompts; one for the pretest and the other for the posttest. Thus, the test was approved as a valid and appropriate tool for measuring business management students' persuasive writing.

6.3.1.5 Test reliability

Two different ways were used to calculate the reliability of the present test;

6.3.1.5.1 Reliability of the tool

The reliability of this test was estimated by administering it to a piloting group of business management students, in two separate sessions (a test re-test method). After that, a coefficient of stability was decided on by calculating the correlation between the students' scores on the two administrations using Pearson product moment correlation formula. The reliability of this test was found (r = .80) which is considered a sound value for such tests.

6.3.1.5.2 Inter-rater reliability

The reliability of this test was also estimated by administering it to the same piloting group. The researcher and another trained rater of his TEFL colleagues rated the writings of the pilot group students on the test scoring rubric. Correlation between scores of the researcher and his colleague was calculated. The reliability coefficient for the persuasive writing test was found (r = 87). This value indicates that this persuasive writing test is reasonably reliable.

6.3.1.6 Test duration

The duration of this test was calculated while administering it to the pilot group for estimating its reliability. The average time for finishing this test was found to be (30) minutes. Accordingly, (30) minutes were decided on to be the optimum time for finishing this test.

6.4 Pre-testing

On 1st February, 2010, before starting the treatment, the persuasive writing test was administered, as a pretest, to level two business management students, the participants of the this study, in order to pre-assess their persuasive writing skills. The test was administered inside the classroom, during a regular writing class, under the direct supervision of the researcher.

6.5 Treatment

A week prior to the treatment, in two 50-minute sessions, students of the two groups were reminded of the particular format followed in writing a persuasive essay. They were given a handout of the persuasive writing scoring rubric used in this study, and they were given detailed oral instructions on how it is used in evaluating their essays. They were also informed that this rubric is useful and helpful for them, as knowing what makes an essay strong before the student begins writing will help him produce a better overall essay. In addition, students were given a handout of the peer feedback worksheet, used in the treatment, and they were instructed and trained on how to use it in giving feedback and comment on their peers' writings.

The treatment was conducted from 2nd February to 29th March 2010, two 50-minute sessions per week, with students of the control group (n=10) giving and receiving feedback inside the classroom among group members, and the experimental group (n=10) giving and receiving feedback through a class blog. Eight persuasive writing prompts were worked upon throughout the eight weeks of the treatment; one assignment per week.

In order to guarantee that every student in both groups has the opportunity to give and take feedback from as many different peers as possible, during the eight weeks of the treatment, students in each group were given numbers from one to ten, and they were paired as shown in table (1).

According to the setting shown in table (1), each student was allowed to give and take feedback from at least three different peers (one at a time). For example, student no. 1, in both groups, was paired with students 2, 6, and 10 of his group; and student no. 7, in both groups, was paired with students 2, 4, 6, and 8 of his group …etc.

Students in the control group were given a handout of the persuasive essay-writing prompt of the week. They were given one session every week for writing and the following session was devoted to face-to-face peer feedback in which they exchange drafts for feedback and comment. They were provided with a printed peer feedback worksheet and they were asked to read their peers' essays, and then give their feedbacks on their peers' writings by giving thoughtful and thorough responses to the questions on that worksheet. After getting feedback from their peers, students were allowed sufficient time to make modifications, corrections, additions, and deletions before submitting their essays to the researcher for grading.

For students of the experimental group, the persuasive essay-writing prompt of the week was posted by the teacher on the class blog. After they were given the link to the class blog, they were asked to write their essays at home or in the computer lab at the college and then post them for their peers to give and take feedback through the class blog according to the setting mentioned above. An online peer feedback worksheet, the structure of which was the same as the printed one was posted on the class blog for the experimental group students. According to this worksheet, experimental group students were asked to read their peers' posted essays, then post their feedbacks and comments on their peers' writings by giving thoughtful and thorough responses to the questions on that worksheet. Students' essays and feedbacks were all posted with the students' names**.** In addition to working in dyads, experimental group students had the option of reading all the posted essays and feedbacks of their colleagues, downloading them and/or printing them out. Certainly, students were allowed full time, as they work at home, to make required modifications, in the light of their peers' posted feedbacks, before posting their essays to the researcher for grading.

6.6 Post-testing

On 3rd April, 2010, after finishing the treatment, the persuasive writing test was re-administered, as a posttest, to level two business management students, the participants of the this study, in order to post-assess their persuasive writing skills. The test was also re-administered inside the classroom, during a regular writing class and under the direct supervision of the researcher.

6.7 Statistical analysis of data

After finishing post-testing procedures, a "t" test for small samples was used to analyze the differences between means of scores of the study participants.

7. Findings and discussion

Following is a discussion of the results obtained. Scores of the subjects in the pre and the post measurements of persuasive writing were compared. Results of comparisons revealed a significant improvement in experimental group students' persuasive writing.

7.1 Testing the first hypothesis

The first hypothesis stipulated, *"There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores obtained by students of the experimental group and those of the control group in the pre-test of persuasive writing"*. Table (2) shows a comparison of the mean scores of the experimental group students and those of the control group in the pre-test of persuasive writing. According to this table, there is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups. Thus, the first hypothesis was affirmed.

7.2 Testing the second hypothesis

The second hypothesis stipulated, "*There is a statistically significant difference favoring the experimental group between the mean scores obtained by students of the experimental group and those of the control group in the post-test of persuasive writing"*. Table (3) shows a comparison of the mean scores of the experimental group students and those of the control group in the post-test of persuasive writing. According to this table, there is a statistically significant difference between means of scores obtained by students of the experimental group and those of the control group in the post-test of persuasive writing. These differences are in favor of the experimental group students. The experimental group students got a higher mean (15.0500) than that obtained by students of the control group (12.7500). The result of the t-test shows that t-value = (-4.87) and the difference is significant at (0.01) level.

These findings affirm the second hypothesis and indicate that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the posttest of persuasive writing. The superiority of the experimental group over the control group is attributed to the effectiveness of the blog-based peer feedback that the experimental group students received on their persuasive writing.

The findings of the present study are compatible with the results of (Fellner & Apple, 2006; Jones, 2006; Mynard, 2007; Namvar et al., 2009; Sun, 2009), who investigated the effectiveness of utilizing weblogs in EFL/ESL language learning. Results of these studies, together with the present one, indicated that Blogging, not only, facilitated language learning, but encouraged students to reflect on their learning and to structure their thoughts.

These findings are in line with the results of many of the previous studies that investigated the effectiveness of using online peer feedback on language learning (Bauer & Figl, 2006; Wu 's , 2006; Ertmer et al., 2007; Guardado & Shi, 2007; Ho & Savignon, 2007; Lu & Bol, 2007; Rourke et al., 2008; Ware & O'Dowd, 2008; Doris, 2009; among others). Results of these studies, together with the present one, indicated that using online peer feedback, as opposed to, face-to-face, could be very beneficial in developing foreign/second language writing.

Actually, through weblogs, EFL business management students were encouraged to trust their own linguistic abilities and they had the opportunity to write freely and express themselves in a relaxed and non-threatening environment. Keeping in mind that their essays were going to be published online for authentic readers, as well as, EFL colleagues who would comment on their postings, students wrote more carefully.

It is clear that, the corrections that EFL business management students in the experimental group received from their peers through the weblog had a greater impact on their persuasive writing than normal face-to-face feedback. These corrections were done in a far more personalized and unthreatening manner, as they were freed from the embarrassment to comment on their peers' writings in traditional classroom face-to-face peer feedback.

Above all, according to the norms of appropriateness in the Arabic and Islamic culture, being too direct in telling someone face-to-face about his mistakes sounds aggressive and impolite. In addition, this culture places a strong value in listening and silence in traditional classrooms. Consequently, in using weblogs, business management students, experienced s a suitable and a face-saving environment in which they give and receive feedback on their writings from their peers that resulted in an immense improvement in their persuasive writing.

8. Conclusions

The present study attempted to investigate the effect of using blog-based peer feedback on the persuasive writing of EFL business management students at the community college in Bisha, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. Results of the analysis of the differences between means of scores of the study subjects in the pre-post-measurements revealed a significant improvement in the students' persuasive writing. This improvement was attributed to the effectiveness of using blog-based peer feedback. These results indicate that blog-based peer feedback is a valuable means for improving students' writing and increasing their confidence as EFL writers. Blogs could be an important forum not only for language improvement but also for social interaction, cooperative learning and negotiation of meaning.

9. Implications

In the light of these findings, some important pedagogical implications related to teaching in general and the teaching of composition in particular, are discussed. As for teaching, it is recommended that blog-based peer feedback is to be used in many courses and not only with language courses as it proved a potentially practical way of giving and receiving feedback in our digital age. Teachers should encourage using blog-based techniques other than peer feedback in the teaching of different courses. Students should be encouraged and helped to connect with their peers in other countries through weblogs to give and receive feedback. The relaxed and unthreatening atmosphere offered by weblogs should be better utilized in teaching other language skills and other disciplines especially among shy students. Careful and realistic web-based peer feedback training is urgently needed for students belonging to Saudi, as well as, similar conservative cultures as a preliminary step towards keener and fruitful peer-feedback.

As for the teaching of composition, using blog-based peer feedback in the foreign\second language writing class can expand the audience of the students and allow them to feel that they are writing to more than just their colleagues or their teacher. In conservative societies, where strict gender segregation is enforced and where girls and boys are separated in school, blog-based peer feedback could be an effective tool for the mutual benefit of the two genders and for providing a forum, not only for the development of composition writing, but also for social interaction and negotiation of meaning.

10. Suggestions for further research

The results of this study can contribute to the literature on the potential values of using the appropriate features of the Web 2.0 era in educational settings. Further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of using the appropriate features of the Web 2.0 era on Arab learners' apprehension of writing in a foreign language and on their confidence as EFL writers. More research is needed to examine the effectiveness of using weblogs, as well as other appropriate features of the Web 2.0 era, in teaching other subjects and in teaching other language skills. Furthermore, future descriptive studies are needed to identify the attitudes of learners with Arabic cultural backgrounds towards using the appropriate features of the Web 2.0 era in education.

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Appendix (1):Pre-post Persuasive Writing Test

King Khalid University

Community College in Bisha

Intensive English program (2)

Persuasive Writing Pre-Test

DIRECTIONS

1. This is a test of your persuasive writing.
2. You will have thirty (30) minutes to finish it.
3. The test comprises only one writing prompt.
4. You are asked to write on this writing prompt.
5. Before you begin planning and writing, read the writing prompt carefully to understand exactly what you are being asked to do.
6. Your writing will be evaluated on the evidence it provides of your ability to meet five main criteria of persuasive writing; statement of position; reasons supporting your position; anticipating opposing viewpoints or reasons against your position; organization of your writing;; and writing conventions.
7. Try planning before you write.
8. You may use the unlined pages in this test booklet to plan your writing. These pages will not be scored. Your writing only on the lined pages will be scored. You may not need all the lined pages, but to ensure you have enough room to finish, do NOT skip lines.
9. You may write corrections or additions neatly between the lines of your essay, but do NOT write in the margins of the lined pages. Illegible essays cannot be scored, so you must write clearly.
10. If you finish before time is called, you may review your work. Lay your pen down immediately when time is called.

DO NOT TURN THIS PAGE UNTIL YOU ARE TOLD TO DO SO.

The Persuasive Writing Pre-test Prompt

Suppose that the company you are working in intends to make a television advertisement to attract buyers to its new product. This advertisement is intended to use sexual attraction as a tool of persuasion by drawing attention and interest to this product and consequently increasing sales.

Write a five-paragraph persuasive essay in which you support or criticize the use of sex in advertising. Clearly state your position and justify it using a series of clear, well-supported reasons. Make sure to anticipate and address opposing viewpoints or reasons against your position.

END OF PRE-TEST

The Persuasive Writing Post-test Prompt

Suppose that, due to budget cuts, the manager decided to reduce the level of wages and salaries in the company you are working in. Of course, this action has its effects on the overall productivity of the company. Write a five-paragraph persuasive essay in which you persuade the manager why this is or is not a good idea.

Clearly state your position and justify it using a series of clear, well-supported reasons. Make sure to anticipate and address opposing viewpoints or reasons against your position.

End of post-Test

Appendix (2): 5-point Scoring Rubric for the Persuasive Writing Pre-Post Test

Student Name: ---------- **Date:** ----------

Criteria	Scoring Scale					Score
	4	3	2	1	0	
Claim or Position	The student takes a position or makes a claim and explains why it is debatable or argumentative.	The student takes a position or makes a claim but does not explain why it is debatable or argumentative	The student takes a position or makes a claim but it is hidden, confused, or vague.	The student attempts to take a position or make a claim but his position or his claim cannot be identified.	The student does not take a position or make a claim at all.	
Reasons Supporting the Claim or the Position	The student provides clear, accurate, strong and sufficient reasons to support his position or his claim.	The student does not provide sufficient reasons to support his position or his claim.	The student provides limited reasons that do not support his position or his claim well.	The student attempts to provide reasons to support his position or claim but the reasons provided are unconvincing and unrelated to his position or his claim.	The student provides no reasons at all that support his position or his claim.	
Opposing Viewpoints or Reasons against the Claim or the Position	The student anticipates opposing viewpoints or reasons against his claim or his position and he addresses them successfully and thoroughly.	The student anticipates and discusses opposing viewpoints or reasons against his claim or his position, but leaves out important reasons.	The student anticipates opposing viewpoints or reasons against his claim or his position but fails to explain them in a way that strengthens his claim or his position.	The student attempts to anticipate some opposing viewpoints or reasons against his claim or his position but in vain.	The student does not anticipate opposing viewpoints and give no reasons against his claim or his position at all.	
Organization	The student's writing is clearly developed and well organized; it has a convincing opening, strong informative body and satisfying conclusion. Paragraph format is appropriate.	The student's writing is reasonably developed but lacks clarity. It has a beginning, middle and an end. It generally uses appropriate paragraph format.	The student's writing is usually organized but sometimes gets off topic. There is a number of errors in paragraph format.	The student attempts to structure his writing but the structure is unsuccessfully developed.	The student's writing is aimless and totally lacks organization.	
Writing Conventions	The student's writing exhibits no grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors. It consistently, exhibits variety in sentence structure and accuracy in word choice.	The student's errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation do not interfere with understanding. His writing exhibits some variety in sentence structure and good word choice.	The student's errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation sometimes interfere with understanding. His writing exhibits uneven control over sentence boundaries and sentence structure. It may exhibit some inaccurate word choices.	The student's errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation interfere with understanding in much of the writing. It exhibits minimal control over sentence boundaries and sentence structure. Word choice is often inaccurate.	The student's errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation severely hinder understanding across the whole writing. It exhibits no control over sentence boundaries and sentence structure and inaccurate word choice in all the writing.	
Total Score						

Table 1. Experimental group students' setting in giving and taking peer-feedback during the eight weeks of the treatment

Weeks (1 & 5)	**Weeks (2& 6)**	**Weeks (3 & 7)**	**Weeks (4 & 8)**
1+2	1+10	5+10	3+10
3+4	2+9	4+9	4+9
5+6	3+8	3+8	5+8
7+8	4+7	2+7	6+7
9+10	5+6	1+6	1+2

Table 2. "t" value, standard deviations and Manes of scores of the students of the control and experimental groups in the pre-test of persuasive writing

Group	*N*	*M*	*SD*	"T" value	Significance
Control	10	9.8000	1.585		No Significance
Experimental	10	9.6500	1.203	.58	

Table 3. "t" value, standard deviations and Manes of scores of the students of the control and experimental groups in the post-test of persuasive writing

Group	N	M	SD	"T" value	Significance
Control	10	12.7500	1.087		
Experimental	10	15.0500	1.499	-4.87	0.01

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